

SOVEREIGN VOICES

The redundancy of mass media;
and moves toward routine & sovereign
means of media production/distribution
in Roebourne, Western Australia.

Frank Rijavec

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank the Aboriginal People of Roebourne who have kindly shared with me their knowledge and experience. I dedicate this article to them for their encouragement and comradeship, and also to my mother Ivanka, who as a partisan in Slovenia resisted fascism and has shared accounts of perseverance and spirit.



Juluwarlu video crew recording at the tree into which Bargunyji the rock python, drugged by Bulinjilmanha's song, drained his poison and lost his fangs, 2004. (Lorraine Coppin)

ABSTRACT

Sovereign Voices is a work in progress that falls into two parts. Part I establishes the social/historical setting – Roebourne, Western Australia – and describes the *Pathology*: the inadequacy and transgression in the response of mainstream media to Roebourne's recent history. The corollary effects of this misrepresentation on the community and the advent of the production of the documentary

Exile and The Kingdom - its exceptionalism and shortcomings - are discussed. Moving from the particular to the general, the broader structural failure of dominant media, its assimilationist function, the unilateral nature of its transmission, the violence of its smothering and the commodification of Aboriginality as media-subject is considered. Specific reference is made to how documentary production in Australia is regulated to conform to establishment and corporate imperatives, and the reflection and entrenchment of these in media schools is noted.

Part II begins with the assertion that, for Indigenous intents and purposes, dominant media and its commissioning agents are redundant in communities like Roebourne and outlines an *Antidote*: the work of Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation – an Indigenous cultural recording, archiving, media production and broadcasting organization. Particular attention is given to the scope of its nascent free-to-air broadcast project and the importance, indeed, social imperative, of using this communication medium to speak with non-general audiences/communities. Juluwarlu's advocacy of employment and training that does more than *supply instruments* for the mines is remarked upon. Finally Sovereign Voices touches on the dilemmas and struggles, the tension between Juluwarlu's core mission and economic survival, and the promise for media practice in Roebourne.



Allan Jacob, Roger Solomon & David Daniel dancing at the Chirratra Kids Culture Camp, 1987. (Bob Hart)

Part I - Pathology

BUSINESS IS BUSINESS

We got a Law in our hand, we didn't lost it, we still got it. Yindjibarndi people still got it, like that, we grip that thing. We hear that a lot of lands have been broken for the Aboriginal people, but we Yindjibarndi people still standing as one. We are all one, we are

helping one another. Don't matter where we come from, we are all one. We want our Law to stand. We want to teach our kids, and that's all.

Allan Jacob in Exile and The Kingdom¹

⊕ LINK TO VIDEO FILE #1 (mp4 format, file size: approx 1.1 MB)

This is a plea from Yindjibarndi elder Allan Jacob who feared that he may never be able to pass on the Law *he held in his hand*; that he may never be able to reach his heirs because they were drifting out of reach into the trauma of the ghetto and the *cultural rip* of television and the white education system.

The post war years in the Pilbara saw diverse communities of Aboriginal people and families forced from their encampments and country and herded into large Aboriginal reserves. This served a top-down government strategy to cut costs and simplify the management of Aboriginal people in outlying ration camps or those who were not wanted on the pastoral stations, and therefore needed to be removed and controlled. The potential and resilience of diverse communities was obliterated. While Government officials preached health and education benefits, the *concentration* of disparate families and tribes in large camps was in fact a formula for suffering, and in the Roebourne Reserve during the 1960s resulted in the death of babies and infants from enteritis, influenza and other diseases.



Members of the Pilbara Aboriginal Church at the Roebourne Reserve where the Church formed, late 1960s. (David Stevens)

The 1960s Pilbara mining boom turned up the heat. Social chaos manifested in the form of hundreds and then thousands of white, migrant and Islander men - single working men, who came to the Pilbara from all over Australia and from abroad to construct the railways, ports, new mining towns and mine sites. Roebourne, the only *open* town in the area (as opposed to the single men's dormitory camps) and its licensed hotel became a magnet for workers out for a drink or to let off steam after long shifts on the construction sites.

In 1967 the pressures of mining development were intensified when the government granted full citizenship rights to every Aborigine in Australia. Aboriginal people in Roebourne called them *drinking rights* because for the first time in their history everyone had the right to buy and drink alcohol. Carol Lockyer, a Department of Community Welfare officer and local Gurrama woman who witnessed these tragic events recalls:

The drinking rights came out, and because the Aboriginal people couldn't compete with the big money that the construction workers were earning, the exploitation of their wives and their children, well teenage girls and things like that just set in because, like I say there was that much exploitation, there was big money, construction workers had nothing to spend it on, they lived in a place called Roebourne where there was nothing around them except this little place... So the Aboriginal community just fell apart, everything fell apart.²

⊕ [LINK TO VIDEO FILE #2](#) (mp4 format, file size: approx 1.6 MB)

While sparing no effort or expense to *open up the north*, the state government demonstrated a callous disregard for the social impact of mining development on the community of Roebourne. A *This Day Tonight* report sums up the attitudes of the day:

Reporter Commentary:

The Victoria Hotel eighteen months ago employed three people behind the bar and struggled to sell forty barrels of beer a week. Now it has fifteen fulltime bar staff and its bulk beer sales put it among the top five hotels in the state.

Interview with the publican of the Victoria Hotel:

Reporter: "Obviously from a business point of view the boom has been a good thing".

Publican: "Oh. Yes".

Reporter: "But from the town's point of view, has it been?"

Publican: "Well it must be because, well, business is business".³

⊕ [LINK TO VIDEO FILE #3](#) (mp4 format, file size: approx 1 MB)

In 1974, the community was moved from the Reserve to a cluster of state houses built around the cemetery. For all its problems, life in the Reserve was self-organised to some degree. The array of shacks, tents and car bodies were organised according to tribal and family groupings and traditional leadership structures were maintained. With the move to the Village, where people were allocated houses arbitrarily, this social organization further deteriorated. Roger Solomon, co-writer and narrator of the documentary *Exile and The Kingdom*, who was 15 years old in 1970, was another witness:

Leadership became very hard in the Old Reserve after drinking rights, but now it was broken down altogether. The discipline and respect system in the community went to pieces. The teenagers who

had grown up in the pressure cooker of development and the early years of drinking rights, were confused and angry, and getting into more and more trouble with the police. A lot of my friends, my age group, never survived.⁴

⊕ LINK TO VIDEO FILE #4 (mp4 format, file size: approx 1.5 MB)



Survivors: Roger Solomon (centre) with John Wedge, Brian Munda, Alan Mack, Marshall Bobby & Steve Adams in the Roebourne Regional Prison, 1989. (Frank Rijavec)

TWISTING THE KNIFE

Shifting the ghetto from tin and canvas to fibro didn't address the root causes of the social devastation, although after the move the community no longer had to suffer the regularly flooding latrines in the Old Reserve. The in-joke of many *nor'westers* during this period was that Port Hedland was the arse-end of the earth, and Roebourne was 200 kilometres up it. The media ran with this theme, and after the unrest that followed John Pat's death in police custody, in classic *blame the victim* form, tagged Roebourne as Western Australia's 'black trouble town'. It should be remembered that it was John Pat's death that served as a touchstone for media reporting of Aboriginal deaths in custody, and that the savage beating this sixteen-year-old boy got from police before his death sparked the calls for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

The news out of Roebourne seemed to be written before reporters had left Perth, Sydney or Melbourne. The themes, it appeared, were gleaned from previous reports so that they all seemed to parrot each other. Mary Edmunds, an Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Islander Studies (AIATSIS) researcher working in the town in the late 1980s noted:

... media representations of Roebourne project the town as a place of simmering racial violence; as having a black population constantly drunk or as the victims of social disintegration; and as a place of repeated violations of law and order which is shunned by its neighbours in the other towns and shunned after dark by **tourists**.⁵

It was as if the town had been branded and reporters felt compelled to sell the *product brand* they knew, the one their producers had sent them thousands of kilometres to harvest fresh images for. The effect of this obsessively negative depiction of the community, heaped as it was on the fresh wounds of dislocation, being confined in a ghetto, infant mortality, free alcohol, was like a twisting knife. Mainstream media across the country commonly depicted drunks outside the pub or lying in the street to illustrate their miserable rant... “little place for tribal skills or culture”; “death finally put the town on the map”; “staggering drunks”; “Violence, death, conflict with police, drunkenness”; “drink fight and play”; “armpit bar for blacks”; “the saddest place in the north”; “black despair, white indifference”... In 1990, seven years after John Pat died in the Roebourne lockup, the Sydney Morning Herald described his community like this:

From a distance the bottom of 'Plonk Valley' - the dry featureless gulch which runs from Roebourne's main street to the foot of Mt Welcome - sparkles under the burning Pilbara sun. The sparkling is glass - a sea of broken red, green and orange glass, testimony to the amount of grog that has been swilled here... the group from 'Plonk Valley' hears a cacophony of voices coming from the hotel. A crowd of Aborigines, the remnants of the Ngarluma, Panyjima, and Yindjibarndi peoples is drinking...⁶



Sydney Morning Herald, March 1990

A year later, as hearings for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody began in the town, Hinch was singing the same tune:

It's a slow death in the village, this is poverty, unemployment and wholesale alcoholism wrapped up in a neat little package.⁷

⊕ [LINK TO VIDEO FILE #5](#) (mp4 format, file size: approx 870 kb)

The media institutions that branded Roebourne have no interest in decentralising their operations so that they might better reflect the diversity and the reality of communities separated by kilometres, cultural make-up, economic

interests, etc. Their objectives take little account of the destructive social/political effect of their transmission on any particular community. Instead they predicate their output on reductionist notions of the *general audience*, and the people of Roebourne have no account in this demographic, few Aboriginal Australians do. There were of course other ways of looking at Roebourne that did not get coverage, things that Ngarluma elder and Village mother Violet Samson felt should be said:

There's always a bad name about Roebourne in our community. People are drunk all the time, not fit for work, always drinking and that, but in the middle of the community, there are some people that doesn't drink. Amongst our community people are caring for each other.⁸

⊕ LINK TO VIDEO FILE #6 (mp4 format, file size: approx 700 kb)

There were deeper psychological implications of the intervention of mass media in Roebourne. In *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* Richard Trudgen describes how the sense of self-worth of Aboriginal people is corroded by internalisation of the opinion held of them: “So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything, that they are sick lazy and unproductive, that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitnes...”⁹ Michael Woodley, who was ten years old in 1981, put it like this:

You can imagine what it was like growing up in those years, the seventies and eighties, as a young kid, a teenager in the Village. That was all we ever saw on the TV about our community. You got to think this was perfectly natural. That this was all that Aboriginal people could be.¹⁰

By July 1987, when I arrived in town proposing the idea of making a film with the community, there was a stigma about the media. Journalists and news camera crews caught harvesting their images of this ‘*black trouble town*’ were often confronted and abused. Although they sensed I was not a regular journalist, Roebourne people were wary of my intentions – with good reason.

Initially I proposed that the film hinge on the death of John Pat in Police custody and examine the role of police in the town and the fraught relationships between police and the community; that it be a tract about social justice. Community leaders I discussed the project with (including Alan Jacob, Roger Solomon, Woodley King, Violet Samson and David Daniel) made it clear that they were not interested in dragging their community over the same ground the mass media had been digging: the death of John Pat, relations between police and the community, dysfunction and substance abuse, etc. They set another direction.



Ngarluma elder James Solomon & Videographer Frank Rijavec, Chirratta Kids Culture Camp, 1987. (Bob Hart)

With the move to the Village Aboriginal households had a regular electricity supply, and for the first time, television (ABC, the first TV station to go to air in Roebourne, started broadcasting in 1973). Elders noted that while their children and grandchildren were learning less and less about their culture, language and country, they were watching more and more television. TV was perceived as a powerful rival for the minds of their grandchildren, however, after some preliminary excursions¹¹, community elders increasingly warmed to the idea of working in a medium that had the potential to reach their younger generations.



Television playback of video footage in the Maitland riverbed, Chirratta Kids Culture Camp, 1987. (Bob Hart)



Roebourne children performing a dance their elders taught them at Chirratta Kids Culture Camp, 1987. (Bob Hart)

Ultimately the production, in collaboration with the community, of the documentary *Exile and The Kingdom*, from July 1987 through 1993, provided elders and the community with a radical contrast to the powerlessness and victimisation they felt at the hands of the media. It gave the community a voice in a way they had not before experienced.

⊕ [LINK TO VIDEO FILE #7 \(FIRST 5 MINUTES OF Exile and The Kingdom\)](#) (mp4 format, file size: approx 12.7 MB)

The achievement of the production was marred in one crucial respect – it failed to transfer to the community the means to continue representation of themselves. It did, however, as we shall see, sow the seeds for such an initiative in later years.

ABORIGINALISM: REDUCTION, CONTROL & ASSIMILATION

The experiences described above raise issues, the implications of which need to be examined in more general terms.

Assimilation is a term that has specific, genocidal connotations for Indigenous Australians. Of course the process of political and economic domination and control by colonial powers everywhere, at all times, has sought to assimilate the subjects and consumers it has not destroyed. In the last century the phenomenon of mass media played a central role in this undertaking. In Australian society, as Marcia Langton argues in her *attempt to develop an anti-colonial critique*, mass media reflects the values and interests of its masters, and viewed from an Indigenous perspective it constitutes an overwhelming aggressive force - in effect a continuation of the colonial assimilationist project:

In film, as in other media, there is a dense history of racist, distorted and often offensive representation of Aboriginal people. Michael Leigh estimates that a staggering 6,000 films have been made about Aborigines. The research and critique by a few critical writers is

diminished to the size of a family of ants in comparison to the elephant of colonial representation.¹²

The imposition of the values of the colonisers is one aspect of the media assault, another is the commodification of Aboriginality into subject packages: native title and land tenure issues (of perennial concern in the non-Aboriginal community), Aboriginal art, occasional award ceremonies that include Aboriginal people, announcements of government grants, *dreamtime*, dysfunction, crime, issues dealing with non-Indigenous-Indigenous relations, etc. These subject categories characterize the scope of the market for Aboriginality in news and entertainment media to this day. It is under the terms of such commodification that mass media recuperates Aboriginality to the wheel of production and consumption, and this smothering and displacement by mass media of diverse Indigenous worldviews, is violent – violent in the same way as the various waves of administration that swept through Arnhem Land were. Of this insidious violence Richard Trudgen made the observation:

The question we need to ask is: ‘What is real violence?’ To me institutionalised violence has been and remains the worst form of violence. It is subtle and almost hidden, wrapped up in the ethnocentric paternalism of the dominant culture.¹³

The commercial renaissance of New Norcia Mission as a cultural tourism project based on, and propagandising, selected elements of the Benedictine tradition and the Benedictine mission in Western Australia provides another example of this violence, of how media can be harnessed to the job of revising or burying unwanted history. It was his determination to put the record straight that motivated Harry Taylor, descendent of New Norcia inmates, to collaborate as co-writer/narrator in the production of the documentary *The Habits of NEW NORCIA*:

The Benedictine Community of New Norcia abandoned its mission to Aboriginal people long ago and in recent years has re-invented itself. Its mission today appears to be self-promotion and running a booming tourism business. The history of New Norcia has been carefully packaged to suit its new mission. There is no place in New-Norcia-the-tourist-attraction for the experiences of the orphanage girls and boys.¹⁴

⊕ [LINK TO VIDEO FILE #8](#) (mp4 format, file size: approx 2.3 MB)

Media *lifestyle* coverage and New Norcia’s self promotional pamphleteering declares it to be one of the State's leading cultural tourist attractions: "A unique blend of Spanish architecture, European art treasures and pioneer history," "Monks, Music & Mystery," "New Norcia, Australia's only monastic town". Tour guides market New Norcia Natural Breads, nut cake and olive oil, tell of fabled miracles and eulogise Bishop Salvado's heroic mission to 'christianise and civilise the natives'.

In *The Habits of NEW NORCIA* former Noongar and Yamatji inmates who had been confined in this orphanage without orphans wanted to answer the popular public discourse about this Benedictine mission which gets regular

space in the magazine and travel pages of the daily press and television travel shows. They challenge this partial story with accounts of what it was like to be taken from family by welfare officers and police, often with violence or deceit, and isolated in a place where *no one really wanted you*; to suffer the rigid controls, physical and emotional violence and threats of damnation; to be taken from so-called neglect to be neglected.

In an address given at the launch of the film, Sir Ronald WILSON, who headed the National Inquiry into the Forced Removal of Aboriginal Children from their Families, acknowledged the damage done by misrepresentation and omission in dominant public discourse:

... there is continuing pain being derived from the absence of a show of generosity of spirit and a true regard for history from the New Norcia authorities in their efforts to survive in this economic rationalistic day, and to see that for survival in terms of tourism, they are spreading a history of the monastery that leaves out the chapter that you are going to hear today.¹⁵

On the national stage, it is disturbing to note the inertia of Australian media since the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody hearings, the Stolen Generations Inquiry, the Wik Native Title Amendments and the annihilation of ATSIC. It has failed to report upon or discuss views about how utterly and methodically these *show trials and political plays* have betrayed the subjects of those inquiries and judgements.

While my observations, especially concerning Roebourne, are 'historical', contemporary media treatment of Roebourne is hardly better. While one may have hoped that the Aboriginal-owned radio broadcast into Roebourne might have provided for significant local input, language and coverage of events, this has not been the case. Instead, Gumala Radio, based in Tom Price, 250 kilometres south of Roebourne, predominantly broadcasts a computer play list of pop, rock and country music, generic advertisements and community announcements, and radio broadcasts linked from other parts of the country. This status is a devolution from Gumala Radio's earlier performance when announcer Keith Lethbridge, in his *Joog's Wangka* program, provided some space for music requests and community news from communities in the region including Roebourne.

Local news coverage is desultory and incapable of dealing with issues of serious concern to the community (housing, education, employment, health, native title) with any rigour or insight. It remains ill informed and has no rapport with Aboriginal opinion. Case in point: recent newspaper coverage (Pilbara News 20/4/05, 15/6/05) promoting RLC Motion Picture Entertainment's plans to shoot a feature film, *Dingo Dreaming*, in the Roebourne Shire which purportedly would "*honour Aboriginal culture*". A copy of the script that Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation¹⁶ requested from the producers in fact demonstrated no understanding of local Indigenous culture, something the news outlets were incapable of discovering or reporting.



Pilbara News, April 20 2005.

The *Dingo Dreaming* script¹⁷ itself represents another example: It depicts acts that would be transgressive and highly offensive in terms of Aboriginal culture in this region. Other scenes in the script describe gangs of petrol sniffers, piles of garbage and beer cans, Aboriginal women screaming obscenities and scenes of trashing and vandalism that are not tolerated or typical in Roebourne. In fact petrol sniffing has never been a feature of substance abuse in Roebourne. Perhaps more disturbing than this betrayal of the authenticity of Indigenous lives, is the patronizing tone of the story that sets facile caricatures in the foreground, in particular, an American hero who puts to right matters in a desert Aboriginal community that the community itself seemingly cannot remedy without his *heroic* intervention.

As one might expect, there is some consternation about, and resistance to, the *Dingo Dreaming* proposal amongst those in the community who have become aware of what the script depicts – concerns that were communicated directly to *Dingo Dreaming*'s producer, Russell Cunningham¹⁸. Nevertheless, in a coincident demonstration of the relationship between media business and politics, Michael Woodley received a phone call from Mr Barry Haase, Federal MP for Kalgoorlie¹⁹, in which Mr Haase represented Russell Cunningham's interests and espoused the production - even though he had not read the script²⁰. Mr Woodley, it should be noted, is Operations Manager for Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation and also Chair of the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Foundation that had declined an application for financial support from the producers.

In *Orientalism* Edward Said concluded that the function of Orientalism was to "...understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even incorporate, what is manifestly a different world..."²¹ The Arab world. We could then construe the function of mainstream media in Roebourne as *Aboriginalism* and understand that its representation of Roebourne people *involves an act of power* by which non-Aboriginal Australia creates Aboriginal people as victims or as a society afflicted in their very nature. This depiction allows the colonisers to rationalize their actions and to marginalise Aboriginal people as *dysfunctional*,

thereby releasing themselves from the fault that is ordinarily attributed to usurpers who dominate, oppress or discriminate against the peoples they have colonised.

GATEKEEPERS & SUPPLICANTS

My experience of documentary production since the early 1980s - my bread, pleasure and bane over that time - affords another view into prescriptive, reductionist media practices.

Australian documentary makers are almost exclusively dependent on the institutional patronage of federal and state film development, financing and broadcast institutions – the Film Finance Corporation, ABC-TV, SBS-TV, Australian Film Commission, Film Australia and each state film office. (Production of film and television outside this framework is negligible in Australia – except perhaps in the media departments of tertiary institutions where it is safely contained.) Such heavy dependence on these audited and regulated agencies is pathological, as much for media practitioners as the cultural, social and political environment we inhabit.

Typically, broadcasters run agendas for broadcast slots. Types of stories and styles are prescribed. Producers in competition with each other often tailor their pitches to conform to *the menu de jour* issued by, or the preference of, particular incumbent commissioning editors, in order to win a slot. Even before producers have arrived at firm concepts for a documentary or have undertaken any serious research or development, it is routine for them to rehearse preliminary sketches with commissioning editors who respond with hands-on editorial direction in a ritual that plays out as natural as the day is long. A network *letter of interest* to a film company that is seeking development funding from a state film agency may indeed spell out these directions recommending, for example, prioritisation of a *reality TV challenge* treatment of a subject. Such letters are in turn used to garner support for development-funding applications submitted to film agencies.

Commissioning editors influence the tenor of production with a rigour that surpasses the prescriptions that networks advertise on their websites. Up to the minute network policies and programming strategies are not advertised, they manifest in reaction to ratings drift or express themselves in the recruitment of particular editors and heads of department who in turn *make their mark*. Any given period may render a climate that is more or less liberal, that allows more or less initiative to filmmakers. I think most documentary filmmakers who have experienced the evolution of our public broadcasting documentary departments over the last 20 years would agree that the climate has never been colder, the horizon never lower than today.

In practice, there are and were lights on the hill – Chris Masters, David Bradbury, Tom Zubricki, Pat Fiske, Robin Anderson, Bob Connolly, Ivan Sen, John Hughes, Richard Frankland, Dennis O’Rourke, Martha Ansara, Paul Roberts, Rachel Perkins to mention a few – however, I contend that their light is diminished under this system, there are films they will not be permitted to make, and the films they *do* usher through to production, are circumscribed by it.

Expressions of the malady rooted in this dependency can be found in industry forums where pragmatic, commercial foci dominate agendas as filmmakers try to come to terms with the *rules of the game*.²² Kerry Sunderland reported from the 2003 Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC):

That many Australian delegates were at AIDC 2003 to finance their projects comes as no surprise. This is why sessions that gave independent producers the opportunity to gain some insight into what commissioning editors want were so popular. So popular, in fact, that after day one the 'Meet the Networks' sessions were moved into the (much larger) lunch marquee.²³

From the same conference Philippa Campey reported that SBSi's Glenys Rowe proposed *that the whole industry should be working toward making documentaries 'sexy' and attractive to a general audience; we should have feature stories on the cover of each weekend newspaper's arts pages*.²⁴

WA's 2005 Small Screen BIG PICTURE Conference promises that scheduled speaker David Bianculli *has seen enough television to be able to tell delegates what works and what doesn't*.²⁵ These forums provide a platform for curators of a putative public taste that contests nothing, for gatekeepers dispensing wisdom on how to capture a market, how to keep audiences from switching channels or switching off.

Writing about the corruption of news media, David McKnight argues that the key to understanding its disorder lies in the political economy of television - *that is, mass markets and advertising*. He says that *under increasing pressures, journalists are internalising the values of the institutions they work for and so can believe they are acting of their own free will ...*²⁶

The same principle is as valid for so-called independent documentary producers beholden to the network hands that feed them. This is after all the platform that remunerates them according to their professional status, the platform that bestows prestige. Indeed, self-consciousness of this Mephistophelian pickle causes despondency amongst many practitioners who value notions of independence.

A media release issued after the 2003 AIDC, prompted by the lies and manipulation channelled by mainstream media in regard to Iraq and moves toward war, expressed delegates' dismay at the sorry state of our media, and their own impotence. It called on mainstream media to *oppose the distortion and manipulation of one of the first casualties of war – TRUTH*. Conference resolutions called on the mainstream media to: resist the propaganda machinery of the US and its allies and to accurately report the views of those who dissent; look to independent sources to reflect the diversity of opinion; to hold freedom of information as their greatest responsibility.²⁷

At the same conference David Bradbury lamented the fact that the public broadcasters *'have the screws on them' from the Federal Government and so are dumbing down, in order to chase ratings*.²⁸

Filmmakers have by and large been conformed and outmanoeuvred by the reflexively, eternally conservative political, bureaucratic and commercial structures that stand over the handful of gateways to 'big' broadcast and distribution. We are constantly being *revised* by commissioning agents and their institutions. Far from fulfilling the aspiration of documentary filmmaker's to make strong, independent films, both in terms of form and content, that are steeped in traditions, milieus or contemporary currents as eclectic and diverse as the practitioners themselves, filmmakers must be content to trim their sails to the prevailing wind and more often than not to collaborate in the rending down of subjects into *commercially viable, commodified consumer media product*.

In this climate filmmakers become beggars or contortionists, hacks and mules. As Chris Hilton explained at the 2003 Australian International Documentary Conference (AIDC), *preparedness to do a little bit of everything, including corporate videos and even docu-soaps – was key to financial success*.²⁹ As Jean Baudrillard argues:

One must surrender to the evidence; art no longer contests anything if it ever did. Revolt is isolated, the malediction "consumed"...³⁰

Everything, even artistic, intellectual, and scientific production, even innovation and transgression, is immediately claimed by the system and produced as sign and exchange value [...] needs, consumption behaviour and cultural behaviour are not only recuperated, but systematically induced and produced as productive forces.³¹

CUT DOWN TO SIZE

All the documentaries I have directed have revealed longer forms in the editing. These extended records contain more complex, inclusive, complete or equivocal accounts. Versions for broadcast however, are always heavily expurgated. The extensive body of research and record that is created for most documentaries is buried and rarely seen in the context, and with the full effect, of their contemporary relevance. My experience of making the eleven hour assembly of *Exile and The Kingdom* available to the Roebourne community, where these tapes are still played, convinces me that this version could be repeatedly broadcast in the community, as could assemblages of archival footage, photo slide shows and *renditions* of document archives.

However, even before production, the potential for detailed and discursive treatments of documentary subjects is reined in by cost-time limitations of budgets or the adjudication of film agency development officers and panels, or network commissioning editors who have a general audience and slots in mind. A customary admonishment to bring filmmakers' minds to heel to the demands of television form counsels them to remember they are not writing a book but making a TV program. When approached to support *Exile and The Kingdom* into production, for example, the ABC rejected it out of hand, as being too ambitious. The commissioning editor reviewing the proposal believed the film could not successfully carry the breadth of subject matter or history outlined in my treatment. It was only after this 110 minute feature was finished

and had screened at the Sydney Film Festival, where it received a strong audience vote, that the ABC committed to purchase.

Gatekeepers wield their influence on an array of other formal details that, in their view, impinge on the ability of a broadcast slot to capture and hold the audience. They weigh in on the choice of title; use of commentary and presenters; beginnings and endings; choice of interviewees; etc. In fact, this power of commissioning editors to pursue particular outcomes is routinely enshrined in contracts film producers make with the networks.

Of course this process of regulation extends to other spheres of exhibition/distribution. Film and video festivals for example, where festival directors exercise the same power as network commissioning editors, though rarely so conservatively as in the 1993 Festival of Perth where inclusion of *Exile and The Kingdom* was denied because the commentary was considered amateurish. It could benefit, a member of the selection panel suggested, by professional revoicing (the film's commentary was spoken in first person by a member of the Aboriginal community it documented).

UNILATERAL TRANSMISSION

The structure of both the commercial and publicly-owned mass media that presides over the *order* described above is corporate. While the mantra issuing from media organizations is *we give audiences what they want*, their transmission in fact delivers a selection of material adjudicated by professionals working in a hierarchical system where they are primarily accountable to other professionals or bureaucrats who are in turn accountable to a political economy defined by mass markets, advertising and ratings.

Ratings scores quantify the number of television sets tuned to a particular channel at a given time. These scores are used by commercial broadcasters as evidence of the number of viewers they are able to deliver to clients who buy advertising slots – the greater the scores, the more attractive a broadcaster appears to prospective clients and the greater the fee they can charge for advertising time. Indeed, the magnitude of ratings scores is similarly used by public broadcasters as justification for their bids to the Federal Government for funding.

Together with price, then, ratings are a key determinant for broadcasters buying in programs from other markets/countries. When buying in *locally* they commonly fit programs to trends they have identified in international markets and to domestic ratings trends. Indeed, witness public television's race to rate against the commercial channels with so-called *reality TV* style programs and *docu-soaps* like *Desperately Seeking Sheila*, *The Colony*, *Outback House* and the plague of lifestyle and food shows.

While the magnitude of ratings is used as a measure of the value of the compact between the broadcaster and the viewing public and as a proof of their assertion that they *give audiences what they want*, the ratings score is in fact a crude tool devoid of qualitative substance that primarily serves to calibrate

relationships between broadcasters and advertisers, or in the case of public broadcasters, with the government instrumentality that funds them.

In his brutal and brilliant examination of signification in our age, *For A Critique Of The Political Economy Of The Sign*, Jean Baudrillard describes the apparatus of mass communications as abstracted from the substance of its communications and explicates the ugly hierarchical structure of mass media and its overwhelmingly unilateral function:

...the totality of the existing architecture of the media finds itself on this [...] definition: *they are what always prevents response*, making all processes of exchange impossible [...] thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact. This is the real abstraction of the media. And the system of social control and power is rooted in it.³²

This marketplace, then, is governed by imperatives that characteristically produce a class of spayed *designer media commodity* whose production is not autonomous but reliant on the imprimatur of the media/political hierarchy that fertilizes the ideas. This hierarchy may permit ideas of interest through, however it commands the gateways and ultimately its regulatory hand has the effect of diminishing vivid, reflexive interplay between the street and the broadcast.

SYMBIOSIS

Filmmakers and broadcasters alike, argue that winning the ratings or the value obtained by capturing and holding as bigger an audience as possible, justifies the system of regulation and prescription outlined above. *Better to moderate form and content and thereby reach the mainstream, they say, than preach to the converted.* But the size of the audience a communication captures does not necessarily guarantee the value of a communication. Neither does the *abundance* of messages generated by mass media assure a better-informed or engaged citizenry. *Abundance* and *profusion* become aspirations and ends in themselves – Jean Baudrillard:

Profusion of goods and profusion of signs in the interests of maximal consumption and maximal information [...] This idealism of messages forgets that it is the hegemony of the code that is installed behind their accelerated circulation [...] The profusion of messages in a way replaces the profusion of goods (the myth of abundance) in the imaginary of the species.³³

In this context, the *code* is *consumption* - the consumption of *media goods* whose very consumption unites consumers and producers/vendors/marketers in a *culture of consumption* that reproduces itself and is ultimately antagonistic to, or disinterested in pluralistic debate:

‘Middleclassing’ is the middle class perpetuating itself in its own image. On the TV screen it views objectively the objective reality of the world and exercises its liberal concern for humanity, and looks at

its politicians trying to reconcile all political differences so that the country may go on to greater material prosperity, united in self-interest. The aim of the middle class is to... unite all opposing elements in a bland and confident materialism which is, in fact, as grey and barren as the screen which celebrates it.³⁴

Chris Masters, one of Australia's finest investigative journalists/filmmakers, has also noted this complicity between media and audiences:

Working in television news and current affairs you often hear how we disappoint the public. But very little is said about how they disappoint us. The fact is bad television generally rates better than good television.³⁵

This *symbiosis* in turn underpins an ideological process that marginalizes views and communities (like Roebourne) that fall outside the *general audience* profile or do not sit well within this code of consumption. Chris Masters again:

Over time in commercial television, unsurprisingly, the only thing that mattered was profit. So news was commodified, and in time the qualities that brought respect and credibility to the industry were corroded. The mantra repeated in the corner office of the current affairs shows was 'give them information they can use'. What was not said out loud was: avoid all the information that will be found to be disturbing, complicated and threatening to a perceived median of the audience's beliefs and values. Don't try to sell them anything that will make the job of selling Cornflakes and Toyotas more difficult.³⁶

This monolithic influence of market/ratings-driven ideology is also shaping film and television courses and the outlook of filmmakers. An industry-driven, tunnel-visioned, vocational learning approach in tertiary institutions and film schools, that aspires to produce graduates to service well established, mainstream media forms are cause for particular concern, because as Baudrillard has noted, it is in the media and its unilateral deployment that the system of social control and power is rooted.

In this environment, we might conclude that film/video practitioners who take seriously the power of the form and the responsibility this implies, who would prefer to work in partnership with *communities* than package commodities for *audiences*, will have to look beyond mainstream structures, strike up new alliances, access new modes of exhibition, broadcast and distribution or find new ways to exploit the old modes. But what recourse for communities like Roebourne?

Indeed, while the voice of the Roebourne community – the dynamism and authenticity of their lives, culture and politics, their collective memory - is smothered by dominant media forms, and while they are denied a regular presence in the media they consume, there are serious implications for the social and cultural future of the community.

Part II - Antidote

Ultimately, history is the root of all people, it is what gives them foundation. The individual history of each person is what defines them, what gives them projection, gives them direction. A person without history, without a past, does not exist... and has no future. They are in the air, in the ether, unable to define themselves. As well, a people without a history cannot advance... cannot exist as a people. They must grab on to something, a root which holds them to the earth, which is their history, their past. Because in one way or another, the past is what makes you construct the present. [...] So what the indigenous must do is fight to regain a space within society, and to plant again the concept of dignity...³⁷

⊕ LINK TO VIDEO FILE #9 (mp4 format, file size: approx 1.7 MB)

SOVEREIGN VOICES

The commissioning editors and establishment media are largely redundant in communities like Roebourne. They cannot, by their very *unilateral, exclusive* nature, give a true space for the existence of the Roebourne Aboriginal community. They never will because the interests of Roebourne people are too distant, too divergent from those of the media industry.

The consequent eclipsing of culture, language and identity by ubiquitous dominant media forms has impelled Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation to develop a capability for production and distribution of their own media, to thereby claim *a space within society* for their own history, to put down a *root which holds them to the earth*. The reward of active participation (for all its trials and errors), against the misery of passive consumption, have been immediate - a subject I will return to at length.



Rebecca Cheedy, Juluwarlu media trainee, 2005. (Frank Rijavec)

INSUFFICIENCY OF PARTISANS & MAVERICKS

As a filmmaker/professional trying to get by in the mainstream I am at liberty to make some choices, negotiate or trade-off within the given terms against the prescriptive, capital-intensive modes of television production. As much as I am able, then, I have tried to use the system to make films that expound a point of view, provide an oppositional *propaganda*, a *partiality* constructed from a body of opinion validated on screen by partners who offer their records of interview, and who invariably have a vested interest in the work. I avoid trading between camps or trying to construct a balance between disparate views. I take a *partisan* position.

In fact no filmmaker can avoid taking a position. They may be more or less clear about their positions. Their utterances may serve transparency, or by avoiding argument and candour, they can camouflage or neutralize subjects and so ultimately serve conservative/reactionary agendas.

Several of my works tackle the colonialist misrepresentation of Australian history and the pattern of abusive exploitation of its environments. My approach takes inspiration from filmmakers like Ken Loach who, in his film about the coal miner's strikes under Thatcher, titled *Which Side Are You On*, was transparent, made no bones about which side he was on.

In his discussions about the Israeli - Palestinian conflict, Edward Said explains his position as an analyst and commentator and why he chooses to

...speak to *all the information that will be found to be disturbing, complicated and threatening to a perceived median of the audience's beliefs and values:*

...there is no neutrality, there can be no neutrality or objectivity about Palestine ... so ideologically saturated is the question of Palestine, so manifestly present is it to most people who come to deal with it, that even a superficial or cursory apprehension of it involves a position taken, an interest defended, a claim or right asserted. There is no indifference, no objectivity, no neutrality because there is simply no room for them in a space that is as crowded and over-determined as this one.³⁸

The same is true, I believe, of any social, historical or political subject a media maker might address in Australia.

While I unquestionably mediate the participation of subjects in my films, my mediation is accountable within the terms of the collaboration. I attempt to mitigate *unilateral transmission* by striking up alliances with subjects who become my collaborators, and I consider myself accountable to them before I am accountable to the producers, commissioning agents or financiers of my projects. This partnership involves subjects in the primary act of research and writing³⁹; screening of the work-in-progress to participants; on-screen commentary by a member of the subject milieu; and the articulation of a coherent argument that is representative of the subject milieu.

So that I could achieve the most favourable terms for collaboration I have tried to stretch production and editing schedules for many weeks over budgeted allotments and I buy time by using cheaper technology/facilities, purchasing and selling equipment to overcome prohibitive hire rates, doubling and tripling as producer, director, researcher, writer, editor or cinematographer to moderate crew costs over extended schedules... all the regular ploys used by filmmakers trying to maximise value ... or profit.

While my work may have contributed something to diversity in the *marketplace of ideas*, its content and forms were certainly reduced and moderated to fit with TV conventions of narrative, pacing, etc. (Less so in the case of *Exile and The Kingdom* which was not financed by TV, but primarily by the Australian Film Commission). Whatever the value that might be placed on the films I have made with collaborators, the process of pitching ideas to broadcasters has become increasingly tedious, vexing and impossible for all the reasons outlined above.

It would be churlish to propose that important work from current affairs producers and filmmakers does not on occasion find *an audience that matters*. How utterly bleak and forbidding the media landscape would be without their offerings. It is a dribble, however, that is becoming thinner. In his lecture *Keeping in touch with my ignorance*⁴⁰, Chris Masters outlined how law, politics and market forces constrain what journalists produce. No matter how powerful the work of individual documentary makers is, there is something fundamentally lacking in the very idea of maverick filmmaking. For the communities beyond the reach of these filmmakers, whose stories or issues will never be privileged by them, their work is just as redundant as that of the

mainstream media to whom these communities are invisible. Ultimately the participation of mavericks in mass media is only as effective as those forms of financing, distribution and broadcast allow it to be.

A remedy, of course, for communities that are exasperated by the wait to be *chosen* and who need to employ the power and facility of media, is to become producers and distributors in their own right.

From a personal perspective, it made sense then, to re-align my practice away from production of broadcast commodities for general audiences, and to work instead with groups seeking to make their own media for their own communities.



Juluwarlu video crew working with Ngarluma elder Frank Smith on Sherlock Station, 2004. (Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation)

TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT THINGS THAT MATTER

Noam Chomsky articulates for me an affirmative understanding of this realignment:

...the responsibility of a writer as a moral agent is to try to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them... and furthermore (another important qualification), it should not be seen as an audience, but as a community of common concern in which one hopes to participate constructively. We should not be speaking TO, but WITH.⁴¹

In 2004, I accepted an invitation to join Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation (JAC), a not-for-profit organisation based in Roebourne, Western Australia, as Media Production & Training Coordinator. This invitation flowed from an association I have had with the community since 1987 when we began work on *Exile and The Kingdom*, a relationship, the working dimension of

which was renewed when in 2003/04 we undertook to revise and republish “*Know the Song, Know the Country*”⁴² and later with the support of an M/Phil candidature (Murdoch University 2004) that provided for a sabbatical from the TV doco paradigm. It was an opportunity to make good the deficit of *Exile and The Kingdom*, to work with the community to develop their own routine, autonomous media voice.

The population of Roebourne is about 1000, 95% of which is Aboriginal and composed predominantly of Ngarluma, Yindjibarndi, Banyjima and Gurrama people. *Juluwarlu* means ‘everyone’ or ‘all together’. Until JAC began its work 6 years ago there was no agency in Roebourne that had so consistently taken up the work of recording and re-presenting local Indigenous culture. Lorraine Coppin and Michael Woodley (both children of the Roebourne Village) invented the Juluwarlu project from scratch, inspired they say, by the example of their elders’ work recorded in *Exile and The Kingdom* and the effect that film had on them and their community. They were driven to action by the imperative to make a record of their language and their elders’ knowledge.



Lorraine Coppin, Juluwarlu founder, archivist & cultural recordist with Rebecca Cheedy, 2005. (Frank Rijavec)



Lorraine Coppin, recording at Ngurrawaana Community, 2005. (Frank Rijavec)

Juluwarlu's objective is to mobilize or liberate records of Indigenous knowledge, to bring the Juluwarlu archive and their emerging media production capability into dynamic play in the local Aboriginal community that comprises Juluwarlu's *first* audience. JAC is exploring media-making in a framework that is variable and flexible according to the cultural, social and political needs of the community, to the demands of each project and the stage of development of each Aboriginal media practitioner involved. The way Juluwarlu works with form and language, its *production values*, time taken to collect and shape materials, the detail and discursive potential of testimonies, etc., would not be tolerated by dominant media broadcast/governance structures. Juluwarlu's approach does, however, add up to another way of seeing.

Over time JAC has established partnerships in the local Aboriginal community, with Indigenous, corporate and government organizations, with non-Aboriginal residents of the region, and universities that have assisted its growth and consolidated its activities. Its ability to form broad-based partnerships and garner such support is one of the keystones of its resilience and success. It now has a staff of 5 fulltime employees, 3 fulltime Media Production Trainees and a dozen Community Development & Employment Program (CDEP) workers.



Brendon Bobby & Tyson Mowarin filming the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Native Title Judgement ceremony, 2005. (Alan Thomson)



Juluwarlu video crew recording Eedie Whalebone on Cooyapooya Station, 2005. (Lorraine Coppin)

JULUWARLU MEDIA

In the last 12 months JAC has taken major steps in its evolution and has confirmed old and embraced new activities:

- Cultural & Historical Recording on a regular, year-round basis.
- Archiving: The JULUWARLU archive holds thousands of still photographs, hundreds of hours of video and sound recordings, manuscripts, maps and transcriptions which have been made/collected in the community over the last 17 years, and other records that have been collected from linguists,

anthropologists, teachers, pastoralists, community welfare officers, policemen, business people, filmmakers, indigenous affairs bodies and others. This collection is acknowledged as being the most significant of its kind in the Pilbara⁴³.

These original or duplicate materials are currently stored in physical/hard copy form at Juluwarlu and are utilised for in-house media production and made accessible to the local community, schools, researchers and community partners from corporate and government organisations. Access, however, is about to be radically improved.

- Digital Archiving: Migration of the physical/photo/video/sound archive to a fully integrated computer-based digital archive (using the Ara *Irititja* system designed for the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara communities) to provide ready community access to the archives and serve video/multimedia production.
- Publishing: Cultural recording and the archive underpin publication of books like *Wanggalili*⁴⁴ and *Know the Song, Know the Country*⁴⁵ and *Garruragan*⁴⁶.
- Video production: Juluwarlu is currently producing three DVD documentaries, value-adding and reversioning another and collaborating on the production of an interactive 3D computer-based program:
 - ***The Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Centre Community*** Consultation, produced in association with the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Foundation, is a 35 minute documentary that records the consultation process and community ideas for the proposed Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Cultural Centre. ⊕ LINK TO VIDEO FILE #10 (mp4 format, file size: approx 4 MB)
 - ***Wanggangarra***, produced with the assistance of Mawarnkarra Aboriginal Medical Service is a 25 minute documentary that describes the concept of *home* or *ngurra*; the origin of local Indigenous families; the richness and complexity of family life; and explains traditions of *skin relationship* and respect within extended families and the broader community.
 - ***Ngurra:2Rivers***, produced with the assistance of the Department of Environment and the Australasian CRC for Interaction Design (ACID) is a 2 x 20 minute documentary that tells the stories for the Fortescue River (Yindjibarndi) and Sherlock River (Ngarluma).
 - Re-versioning ***Exile and The Kingdom*** to DVD/Digital format with addition of 34 traditional songs, biographies of all interviewees and a PDF version of the revised *Know the Song, Know the Country booklet*.
 - ***Wankangarra***, produced collaboratively with ACID (with the assistance of Queensland University) is an interactive computer-based program in a game format that recounts Yindjibarndi creation stories.



Extended Yindjibarndi family group at Thamathama during recording field trip, 2004. (Lorraine Coppin)

LOCAL INDIGENOUS BROADCAST: JTV-34

On the 23rd of June 2005 JAC was granted an Open Narrow Cast television licence. Initially this channel will retransmit Indigenous Community Television⁴⁷ (ICTV) which pools programming from Warlpiri Media⁴⁸, Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Media⁴⁹, Ngaanyatjarra Media⁵⁰ and PAKAM⁵¹ (Pilbara and Kimberley Aboriginal Media). Juluwarlu will include its own programs on ICTV by contributing material for inclusion in the block-programming packages that PAKAM assembles for ICTV. JAC envisages that transmission of Indigenous programming from around Australia into the community will provide models for media production and broadcast, and by example help to extend the community's capabilities in media production. It is intended that as the community's abilities and volume of production grow, and as its relationships with other Indigenous and community content providers develop, so will the volume of locally programmed production put to air. (Broadcast equipment has been installed and the first transmission planned for September 2005.)

Note that funding for JAC broadcast infrastructure has not come from a government or Indigenous instrumentality, but has been negotiated with the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Foundation⁵² and Woodside Energy (Woodside operates the North West Shelf Venture on the Burrup Peninsula, Australia's largest resource project.)⁵³

The significance of this development is immense. *Juluwarlu TV* will be the first town-based television broadcasting facility in the Pilbara, the second Indigenous television broadcaster in the state (after Goolarri TV⁵⁴ in Broome), and the third Western Australian-based/controlled broadcaster (after Perth-based Community TV Channel 31 and Goolarri TV). JTV will be in the historic and unique position of being able to deliver services to local communities that the other Eastern States-based broadcasters – ABC, SBS, GWN, WIN, Ch7, CH9, CH10 – cannot or will not.

Potentially this broadcast facility will enable JAC to much more effectively fulfil its aim of liberating, for the local *community of concern*, a plethora of media from its archive and to generate new material - recordings of public meetings; health and education materials delivered with local voices; current affairs discussion panels; local sports and cultural events, etc.

Models like ICTV and the JAC project, which recognise that there are non-general audiences - *communities that can be engaged in dialogue* - who value their production precisely because they are not aggregated or conformed to the imaginary palate of the *general audience*, have the potential to change the media landscape, but their development and diffusion are still in infancy.



Keith Joog Lethbridge, JTV-34 Station Manager & Michael Woodley, Juluwarlu co-founder & operations manager, 2005. (Frank Rijavec)

LATERAL INTEGRATION

There are special features that characterize the Juluwarlu project which are an important legacy of its origins. Today all activities - cultural recording, archiving, video production and (soon-to-be) television broadcast - are laterally integrated. Each area of activity draws on or feeds into every other area, and the success and authenticity of Juluwarlu's over-all project relies on this integration. Video production and broadcasting are tertiary functions built on the foundations of cultural recording and archiving which underwrite Juluwarlu's work, lending a measure of subtlety, detail and depth that the mass media could rarely, if ever, entertain in their treatment of local events and issues.

MEDIA & COMMUNITY BUILDING

Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation notes that one of the most significant challenges it faces in delivering effective health care to its

communities in far west New South Wales is lack of access to mass communication. Maari Ma finds it difficult to communicate important health and community development messages to a large number of people quickly and effectively; leading to delays in projects and initiatives designed to help Indigenous people.⁵⁵

As in many Aboriginal communities, issues of health in Roebourne are of critical concern. The chronic state of health in the community, in all its personal and social dimensions, is a continual and overriding preoccupation for Juluwarlu and a host of other community organizations that must deal with the fallout.

The correlation of health to an individual sense of self-esteem, to issues of identity and to a sense of community pride and respect provides an essential role for Indigenous media. Media that celebrates culture and history, which affirms the contemporary lives of community members, re-produces and maintains culture and, crucially, which gives the community a voice, is central to addressing the causes of health problems in a holistic and longer-term framework precisely because it counters the internalisation of the negative perceptions Trudgen talks about⁵⁶. This harmful potency of negative representation of Aboriginal people is borne out by Maari Ma:

Maari Ma argues that negative stereotyping of Indigenous people in mainstream media affects the social and emotional wellbeing of Indigenous young people, and that this can in some cases lead to self-destructive behaviour of various kinds, including drug abuse.⁵⁷

The importance of endemic TV broadcast is magnified by the fact that homes in Roebourne rarely have access to computers or internet/email, and free-to-air television remains the most highly consumed and available form of media. As a medium for health, education, cultural and other programming of special consequence to Indigenous people, community-access television, arguably, has the greatest potential to be effective. This is the fundamental reason why JAC has developed a video production capability and seeks to disseminate programming via television broadcast.

The failure of well-intentioned and repeatedly offered health and education messages to motivate better health outcomes in Aboriginal communities, to the same degree as in the broader community (decrease in rates of smoking for example), may indicate Aboriginal alienation from the media culture employed to carry these messages. These messages usually come in another language, from strangers, in cultural and aesthetic forms that are exotic and have no currency in the normal traffic of community discourse, and so are consequently received with indifference if not suspicion and resistance.

Nor does the work, essential and welcomed as it is, of Indigenous media-makers who penetrate the mainstream, necessarily fill the gap. Disparate communities around the country cannot be represented by Indigenous voices from other places who often operate with the support, and within the constraints of, the fairly exclusive and prescriptive film bureaucracies and public broadcasters discussed earlier. Although they do serve as inspiration, voices from other places cannot substitute for the authenticity, exhilaration and power

of one's own. Community-based television production will provide the opportunity to redress these shortcomings.

It should be noted that Juluwarlu TV and the media work based on JAC's indigenous knowledge resources will also be available (free-to-air) to the broader non-indigenous community of this region, helping to promote cross-cultural relations by telling it like local Indigenous people see it. The effect that direct access to a local Indigenous voice has on the broader social, cultural, administrative and political life of the region will be a phenomenon we might learn from in the years ahead.

PARADIGM SHIFT: MORE THAN DRONES FOR THE RESOURCE SECTOR

Indigenous training programs in mining companies and employment strategies across the Pilbara have traditionally had a strong focus on skills that directly service the resource sector and have targeted men. These programs have had very mixed results⁵⁸. The idea that there are economies in the Pilbara *other than* resource-based (or perhaps tourism-based) ones, and that these have an equally vital role in the economy and the public life of North West communities, seems to have escaped most administrators and planners.

JAC maintains that skills training in the community must provide for more than tradesmen and labourers in the resources/infrastructure industry, for more than gardeners and officers of health, education and justice organizations – as desirable and essential as these might be.

Just as necessary are jobs in the fields of culture, media/communications, knowledge management, arts and education. These *hearth & hob*, culture-based industries and services as they are expressed in literature, music, films, TV, theatre and so on, are taken for granted in our Western/English-language society, but are crucial, especially when from an Aboriginal perspective, in local Aboriginal communities. Participation in production of such services stimulates cultural, social and political life; nurtures community and identity; shares knowledge and skills, etc.



Tyson Mowarin, Juluwarlu media trainee at his Final Cut Pro editing station, 2005. (Frank Rijavec)

It should also be noted that many Aboriginal people do not participate in industrial work places because, for both cultural and family reasons, they find it impossible to conform to the work schedules demanded by industry. Michael Woodley, the operations manager and co-founder of JAC, cites his own example. He was in the first Hamersley Iron⁵⁹ trainee intake and became a star recruit. He graduated to their workforce but ultimately, after 5 years service, resigned to join his partner Lorraine Coppin in building Juluwarlu. Certainly his major motive had to do with the fact that his heart was closer to this community/cultural work, but the rigidity and relentlessness of long shifts and weeks away from home were also damaging his family, community and cultural life – a very good reason why corporations and government need to rethink their ideas about education and training in Aboriginal communities.

Juluwarlu has broken new ground in agreements it has made with Woodside Energy, who, under the stewardship of Meath Hammond, has responded to Juluwarlu's proposals to establish infrastructure and train Aboriginal people for its community-based media initiatives. However, in the current environment, it is not easy. JAC, for example, must send its media trainees to a Registered Training Organization (RTO) 800 kilometres away in Broome (Goolarri Enterprises) because TAFE in Roebourne, Karratha and Port Hedland do not offer the required units. Also, getting the concept of this paradigm shift through to others who hold to the idea that the only real jobs are to be found in the resources sector has proved difficult.

OUTLOOK

The provision of this ONC Licence to Juluwarlu is an exceptional case and belies the fact that the bigger picture of Indigenous broadcasting has been

ad hoc and uncertain. The BRACS⁶⁰ (Broadcast to Remote Aboriginal Communities) licences, inaugurated in 1988, provided for retransmission of free-to-air public and commercial channels, local TV production/broadcast and radio broadcast in *remote* communities. However, these facilities experienced a rapid demise in the amount of locally produced television content they could broadcast because they were starved of resources for training and maintenance.⁶¹

In 1992 BRACS were converted to Community TV licences and facilities were revamped with a new injection of resources, but the one-off nature of this support saw production flounder once again. Then in April of 2005 in response to lobbying from IRCA (Indigenous Remote Communications Association), the Federal Government promised \$2 million to provide additional television transmitters that would enable retransmission of ICTV⁶² on a dedicated channel to eighty Indigenous communities at Remote Indigenous Broadcasting Services (RIBS) sites across Australia. This was expanded to 145 *remote* sites, but still no provision was made for Indigenous broadcasting in the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) Licence Area Plans for *towns* with large Aboriginal populations.

As I write there is the appearance of more action. On 1 September 2005 Senator Helen Coonan, Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) issued a media release titled: Telstra sale to benefit Indigenous broadcasting. The Minister stated that upon the sale of Telstra \$48.5 million over four years would be provided for the development of an Indigenous television service:

The new Indigenous television service will build on an initiative already being transmitted on Imparja Television's narrowcast service that uses content provided by Remote Indigenous Media Organisations. New content will be developed for the service and will be available for transmission on other broadcasting platforms, such as community television.⁶³

This follows on the release in August 2005 of the Indigenous Television Review Report into the viability of establishing an Indigenous television broadcasting service and the regulatory arrangements that should apply to the digital transmission of such a service.⁶⁴

It is not clear yet if and when Telstra will be sold, how the proposed Indigenous television service will be structured or how resources might be divided in a future Indigenous broadcast landscape. It seems that a variance is emerging between a high production value, professionally manufactured and quite possibly, commercially-sponsored model structured along corporate lines, and a grassroots, collective, community-access model that does not adhere to *conventional* production-value benchmarks.

Contrasts between these paradigms are evident between the practice of Goolarri TV, Imparja⁶⁵ and the proposals of the National Indigenous TV Committee⁶⁶ on the one hand, and ICTV (which sources programming from Warlpiri Media, Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Media, Ngaanyatjarra Media and

PAKAM) on the other. How these potentially divergent interests work together or compete will have considerable influence on the fortunes of Indigenous media in the years ahead.

It would be inopportune if a national Indigenous television service replicated the corporatist/hierarchical/unilateral structure of commercial and public broadcasters instead of forging a broad-based, *grassroots* structure that would allow Aboriginal communities across the country autonomy and diversity of approach.

CODA – DILEMMA & STRUGGLE

JAC has uncovered and cultivated a palate of funding comprised of private/corporate and government sources, and is bolstered by the human resources of the community itself. While there are compliance requirements attached to funding, to date these have not been product-fixated and have had little interest in meddling in questions of style, form or editorial content, etc. Instead, longer-term cultural and social outcomes that Juluwarlu has defined serve as *benchmarks*.

In the future, by reason of economic pressure or policy shifts within Juluwarlu, there is no guarantee that such independence will hold. The struggle to maintain resources in order to develop infrastructure and to train and recruit staff never ceases. Tensions between Juluwarlu's core cultural business and the consuming effort of fundraising and corporate service-for-hire or commercial work may grow. In fact opportunities to produce commissioned/commercial work for payment have already presented and are being considered.

If it so chooses, once it has consolidated in-house development of skills and capabilities and is satisfied that it is meeting its core cultural objectives, then Juluwarlu may expand its function to fee-for-service work. For example, Juluwarlu will be in a position to service the special media/communication requirements of organizations such as Mawarnkarra Aboriginal Medical Service, the Roebourne Regional Prison, TAFE, primary, secondary and tertiary education, the Shire of Roebourne, and other organizations that seek to reach citizens in JTV's *community of concern*. Similarly, the personnel Juluwarlu trains, the photo/sound/video archive it is building and the media artefacts it is producing may provide for 'cultural tourism' projects that the community is developing such as the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Cultural Centre.

If Juluwarlu seeks to *secure strings*-attached funding from state/federal film agencies and other public funding providers, or opts for commercial work, the requirement to conform to more *professional* standards may in turn compel Juluwarlu to seek more technocratic development models for their trainees that may require trainees to leave the community for instruction. This course may bring benefits, however, the danger is that trainees may be inculcated with *alien standards* and will forgo the opportunity of developing in a unique and responsive way to their own environment.

Fee-for-service work may be important for generation of capital that could be used to subsidise Juluwarlu's cultural priorities and provide employment, alternatively the demands of commercial or *high-end* work may drain energy and time from community/cultural/social/historical work. Tensions similar to those that have emerged on the national stage will no doubt arise in Roebourne. How will these resolve between professionalism and community access, between commercial imperatives and cultural imperatives? Will the primacy of cultural recording and archiving hold its own against the dynamism of video production and broadcast?

CAUTION

In his account of Warlpiri media practice, Eric Michaels sounded a warning about the infiltration of alien bureaucratic standards:

Wherever Australian officialdom appropriates a population, as it has attempted to do with Aborigines, it quickly bureaucratises such relationships in the name of social welfare. This assuredly defeats the emergence of their sovereign forms of expression. [...] I want to subvert the bureaucratisation of these [Warlpiri media] forms, such as may be expressed in the training programs, funding guidelines, or development projects which claim to advance Aborigines, but always impose standards alien to the art (because these will be alien to the culture producing it).⁶⁷

This resonates with Kamilaroi/Charleville artist Richard Bell's *Theorem of Aboriginal art: it's a white thing*, wherein he describes the conditions by which non-Aboriginal systems have appropriated Aboriginal art. Aboriginal art is white he says because *they decide what is good, and they buy it*.⁶⁸ Aboriginal art has been condemned, Bells says, to non-Aboriginal systems of control:

Aboriginal Art has become a product of the times. A commodity. The result of a concerted and sustained marketing strategy, albeit, one that has been loose and uncoordinated. There is no Aboriginal Art Industry. There is, however, an industry that caters for Aboriginal Art. The key players in that industry are not Aboriginal. They are mostly White people whose areas of expertise are in the fields of anthropology and 'Western Art'. It will be shown here how key issues interrelate to produce the phenomenon called Aboriginal Art and how those issues conspire to condemn it to non-Aboriginal control.⁶⁹

At the same time as he challenges and subverts the commodification of Aboriginal art, Bell does not hold out much hope:

It is extremely doubtful whether Aboriginal People in Australia will ever be able to regain control of this important part of our culture. Obstacles and barriers have been cruelly and thoughtfully placed to deprive us of an equitable future. For example: The Native Title Act; stereotyping of Aboriginal people as lazy-good-for-nothing drunks; valorising one group of Aboriginal people whilst demonising another on the basis of racial purity; inflicting anthropologists upon us;

sanctioning a new tribal order; subjecting us to paternalism and exploitation; appropriating our images etc.⁷⁰

These observations are daunting but nevertheless provide salutary lessons to assist present-day Indigenous media projects like Juluwarlu's to navigate the treacherous shoals of the political economy of media production.

HYBRID CULTURES

Issues much closer to home will also arise. In Roebourne the media makers are not *mobile* professionals but a part of a community that watches *as well as* participates in their production. They are immediately accountable to their community/audience. What kinds of pressures on program-makers will such an intimate relationship bring?

Media making and broadcasting sometimes involves confrontation and contention, as indeed the making of any straightforward cultural record may do. How will Indigenous producers based in their traditional communities ask questions and foster debate? Or, indeed, will they find it difficult to find the detachment or freedom to negotiate such debate and so subsequently seek to avoid subjects that may be contentious because of their position within the network of community and inter-tribal relations?

How will community and traditional obligations sit beside media makers' own creative inclinations, professional or political aspirations and hybrid cultural bents?

IDENTITY IN ACTION

It must be said that irrefutable, irresistible, mainstream television and predominantly Hollywood movies will continue to command the media-scape of Roebourne for the foreseeable future. What kind of intervention will the Juluwarlu project represent in five, ten years time? What kind of difference will it make to the wellbeing of their community? Will their stab at autonomy be sustainable, permissible?

We may be optimistic if we consider the effect of the documentary *Exile and The Kingdom*, which, within limits, provided a powerful, evergreen, agent for the community. We may even be sanguine, because this time the community is attaining and commanding the means of production and broadcast that will equip it to act, to forge a future of its own making that is not fossilized, dependent on outside professionals or captive to colonial representations. Indigenous media makers in Roebourne will have the wherewithal to subvert the system's horrors and powers and to shift focus to *what the community wants and how they might most effectively struggle to win it*. They will have access to a public forum in which they can ask *what is missing from consciousness that is needed for activism to take hold, and try to help provide that*.⁷¹

The optimism that the possibility of *action* brings, of being an actor in the *becoming* of one's own culture or community, is eloquently expressed by Eduardo Galeano - as quoted by Kim Scott:

Our collective identity is born out of the past and is nourished by it – our feet tread where others trod before us ... but this identity is not frozen into nostalgia. We are not, to be sure, going to discover our hidden countenance in the artificial perpetuation of customs, clothing and curios which tourists demand of conquered peoples. We are what we do, especially what we do to change what we are: our identity resides in action and in struggle...⁷²

Indeed, it is the community's very engagement with and challenge of dominant and ubiquitous media forms, as messy and iconoclastic and compromising as this struggle might sometimes be, that brings with it gifts.



Yindjibarndi elder Ned Cheedy with great granddaughter Layla at Buminyji Ration Camp, 2005. (Lorraine Coppin)

Addendum: (Juluwarlu Newsletter pdf.)

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